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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard   "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, finally, there's no snow on the ground; and we've seemed to turn the
corner with the cold weather. Sure, it's been a bit frosty for a few
mornings, but it's warmed up fairly well as the sun shines, and sticks
around a bit longer each day. Finally.

The economy doesn't seem to be getting much better these days, no matter
what new schemes our government tries. Who knows how much worse things
can get, or what people are going to do. It's tough to hear about friends
and neighbors losing their jobs, and worse. And what makes things worse,
if that's possible to imagine (and it is!), we the taxpayers have to pay
to continue to help fix this mess. And one way or another, we're going to
pay!

So, what do we do? Beats the heck outta me! I'll just keep doing what I
have to do to pay my bills and keep a roof over my house and put food on
the table. Sure, it means working two jobs, and staying away from those
"impulse purchases" because of the decreased amount of "disposable"
income. But, that's what happens in tight times like these.

On that note, and partially because it's been another long and tiring
week, let's move on to another week of A-ONE!

Until next time...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Ubisoft Making Food-Raining Game!
   """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""   PSP2 Out Before Christmas?
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                                      And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Ubisoft Making Food-Raining Game

French videogame titan Ubisoft is cooking up a title to serve along with the release of "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs," an animated film set in a town where food rains from the sky.

Ubisoft is working with Sony Pictures Animation, which based the movie on a children's book that depicts a town of Chewandswallow where precipitation in the form of meals falls thrice daily.

Ubisoft says it will have a "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs" videogame ready for handheld devices and home consoles when the 3D film being distributed by Colombia Pictures debuts in theaters in September.

"Our teams are already working together to create a fun and engaging interactive game that will extend the film experience," said Sony Pictures Consumer Products vice president Mark Caplan.

"Our past projects together have shown that Ubisoft understands how to translate the artistry and storytelling of Sony Pictures Animation's films to the world of video games."

Ubisoft has made videogames based on Sony films "Open Season" and "Surf's Up."

Sony bills the coming film as "the most delicious event since macaroni and cheese."

Voice actors in the film include James Caan and Mr. T.

"Our teams are looking forward to creating a game that will offer parents and children an entertaining experience that they can share together while reliving their favorite moments from the film," said Christian Salomon, vice president of worldwide licensing at Ubisoft.

PSP2 Out Before Christmas?

Sony may release its ballyhooed PSP2 later this year, say the prophets at Pocket Gamer who claim their anonymous source is not Dave Perry. That's because Dave Perry - possibly to his chagrin - is in fact the guy who only a few weeks ago said he knows *another* guy who's working on a prototype of a PSP without a UMD drive (for non-PSP-wonks, that's the mini-disc games and movies play from). No UMD drive equals radical architectural shift equals something a bit more distinguished than an iterative model number bump. Ergo 'PSP2'.

So Pocket Gamer's source (anonymous of course) is raising Perry's UMD-less PSP2 by a touchscreen that slides open and a pair of dual analogue thumb nubs. They go one further by suggesting the specs and pricing will make waves at E3 this June.

Word is, this device is being bumped up to compete with Apple's iPhone

and Nintendo's DSi. Right or wrong about the device specs or exact release timeframe, sitting on your hands while your competitors drink your milkshake is just sloppy, and while Sony may on occasion be egoistically blinkered, it's not stupid.

The device described above would dovetail with Sony's recent PS3 interoperability push. The PSP game Resistance: Retribution already employs a cross-link featured dubbed 'PSP Plus' that allows you to play the game using your PS3's DualShock 3 controller. Anyone looks for a current-future dual-analogue development link, there it is. And who knows...it's not beyond the pale to speculate about Sony offering updates to existing games that might benefit considerably from use of a second analogue nub. The Syphon Filter and Metal Gear Solid third-person shooters both come to mind just for starters.

How would you feel about a UMD-less PSP? I'd be thrilled, frankly. Even the quieter UMD drive in the newer iterations drives my wife crazy if I opt to play in bed at night. I'm also weary of hunting for slipcases to tuck my UMD discs into. Whoever thought leaving the accessible gap without some sort of protective slider (like you used to see on 3.5" floppy disks) apparently wears a bunny suit and lives in a cleanroom.

I'm also stoked about rumors of direct-download gaming. UMD discs can store up to 1.8GB dual-layered. I can pick up a 32GB memory card (memory stick duo) for just north of $100. If we're allowed to back them up to our PS3s or PCs, the possibilities for stamp-sized-library gaming are tantalizing.

As for the touchscreen, I don't care about playing simple games with the touchscreen closed, but I'd be all over an SD (or micro-SD) EVDO wireless modem. If Sony wants to back into the telephony market the same way Apple's currently backing into gaming, they'll need more than just Wi-Fi and Skype to ante up.

Anything else you're hoping to see in Sony's inevitable PSP-next?

Action Video Games Sharpen Eyesight

Adults who play a lot of action video games may be improving their eyesight, U.S. researchers said on Sunday.

They said people who used a video-game training program saw significant improvements in their ability to notice subtle differences in shades of gray, a finding that may help people who have trouble with night driving.

"Normally, improving contrast sensitivity means getting glasses or eye surgery - somehow changing the optics of the eye," said Daphne Bavelier of the University of Rochester in New York, whose study appears in the journal Nature Neuroscience.

"But we've found that action video games train the brain to process the existing visual information more efficiently, and the improvements last for months after game play stopped."

For the study, the team divided 22 students into two groups. One group played the action games "Call of Duty 2" by Activision Blizzard Inc and Epic Games' "Unreal Tournament 2004." A second played Electronic Arts

Inc's "The Sims 2," a game they said does not require as much hand-eye coordination.

The two groups played 50 hours of their assigned games over the course of nine weeks. At the end of the training, the action game players showed an average of 43 percent improvement in their ability to discern close shades of gray, while the Sims players showed none.

Bavelier found very practiced action gamers became 58 percent better at perceiving fine differences in contrast.

"When people play action games, they're changing the brain's pathway responsible for visual processing. These games push the human visual system to the limits and the brain adapts to it," Bavelier said in a statement.

She said the findings show that action video-game training may be a useful complement to eye-correction techniques.

Co-creator of Dungeons & Dragons Dies at 61

Dave Arneson, one of the co-creators of the Dungeons & Dragons fantasy game and a pioneer of role-playing entertainment, died after a two-year battle with cancer, his family said Thursday. He was 61.

Arneson's daughter, Malia Weinhagen of Maplewood, said her father died peacefully Tuesday in hospice care in St. Paul.

Arneson and Gary Gygax developed Dungeons & Dragons in 1974 using medieval characters and mythical creatures. The game known for its oddly shaped dice became a hit, particularly among teenage boys. It eventually was turned into video games, books and movies. Gygax died in March 2008.

"The biggest thing about my dad's world is he wanted people to have fun in life," Weinhagen said. "I think we get distracted by the everyday things you have to do in life and we forget to enjoy life and have fun.

"But my dad never did," she said. "He just wanted people to have fun."

Dungeons & Dragons players create fictional characters and carry out their adventures with the help of complicated rules. The quintessential geek pastime, it spawned copycat games and later inspired a whole genre of computer games that's still growing in popularity.

"(Arneson) developed many of the fundamental ideas of role-playing: that each player controls just one hero, that heroes gain power through adventures, and that personality is as important as combat prowess," according to a statement from Wizards of the Coast, a subsidiary of Hasbro, Inc. that produces Dungeons & Dragons.

Blackmoor, a game Arneson was developing before D&D, was the "first-ever role-playing campaign and the prototype for all (role-playing game) campaigns since," the company said.

Arneson and Gygax were dedicated tabletop wargamers who recreated historical battles with painted miniature armies and fleets. They met in 1969 at a convention, and their first collaboration, along with Mike

Carr, was a set of rules for sailing-ship battles called "Don't Give Up
the Ship!"

In later years, Dave published other role-playing games and started his
own game-publishing company and computer game company. He also taught
classes in game design. He was inducted into the Academy of Adventure
Gaming Arts and Design Hall of Fame in 1984.

Weinhagen said her father enjoyed teaching game design at Full Sail
University in Winter Park, Fla., in recent years, where he taught
students to make a solid set of rules for their games.

"He said if you have a good foundation and a good set of rules, people
would play the game again," Weinhagen said.

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                    A-ONE's Headline News
                The Latest in Computer Technology News
                   Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

            Sun Unmoored as Acquisition Talks Hit Standstill

Without IBM Corp.'s $7 billion takeover offer, Sun Microsystems Inc., a
Silicon Valley rebel known for independence, is possibly alone again.
Unless a new suitor somehow emerges, Sun will have to overcome the
wobbly finances that forced it to shop itself around.

Sun's shares tumbled 23 percent Monday to close at $6.56, a day after
talks between the corporate computing rivals fell apart.

The two sides had been nearing an agreement before the weekend. But Sun
balked at IBM's last price of $9.40 per share, which had come down from
earlier offers but still was about double Sun's stock price before word
of the negotiations leaked last month. Sun canceled IBM's exclusive
negotiating rights, and IBM withdrew its offer, people familiar with the
situation told The Associated Press. These people requested anonymity
because they weren't authorized to disclose details of the talks.

IBM and Sun might still end up together. Investors appear to be taking
that prospect into account, as Sun's stock hasn't fallen all the way
back to the $4 to $5 range it occupied before the acquisition
discussions surfaced.

Even so, the public unraveling of the talks is an embarrassment for Sun,
which has been dogged by billions in losses since the dot-com bubble
burst in 2001. The breakdown could be a boon for IBM, which doesn't need
the deal as badly, and now could demand an even cheaper price if Sun's
investors hammer the company for rebuffing the offer.

Sun's CEO, Jonathan Schwartz, whose peace offerings to former enemies
like IBM paved the way for the once-hard-to-imagine deal talks, could
get caught in the fallout.

The situation is reminiscent of what happened last year to Yahoo Inc., which rejected a $47.5 billion takeover offer from Microsoft Corp. Yahoo shareholders howled about the squandered opportunity, and Yahoo co-founder Jerry Yang later stepped down as CEO. Yahoo's stock now trades for less than half the price Microsoft offered.

"Let's hope that Sun doesn't go down the same path as Yahoo," said Rick Hanna, equity analyst with Morningstar Inc. "I hope this wasn't a brinksmanship play by the company's board, because there really are so few suitors for the company. A deal has to happen for Sun long term. I just can't see them remaining independent."

Analysts have been predicting Sun's demise as an standalone company for years, but the recession sharpened the company's problems. Sun has already cut thousands of jobs over the past few years and has about 33,500 employees now.

One hang-up in the talks with IBM has been the terms of a commitment from IBM that it will see the deal through even if antitrust regulators raise objections.

The two companies overlap in several areas that could draw antitrust scrutiny, particularly tape-based data storage, where together IBM and Sun would own 52 percent of a $3.1 billion market. The companies also would have 65 percent of $17.2 billion market for high-end server computers that run the Unix operating system, according to market research firm IDC.

It's not clear whether Sun has other potential partners waiting in the wings. The list of other possible buyers is very short: Hewlett-Packard Co., Dell Inc. and Cisco Systems Inc. are a few options, though none has publicly expressed interest.

Analyst Bob Djurdjevic, president of Annex Research Inc., said the premium IBM was offering was better than anything Sun could expect from other potential buyers in this rocky economy.

"My first thought was, oh my God, these guys are off their rockers - IBM threw them a rope, and they used it to make a noose," Djurdjevic said.

One reason IBM is interested in Sun is to claim more control over the development of the Java programming language, which Sun invented and is widely used to develop applications for Web sites and mobile phones. Another is Sun's MySQL database software, which is used by Web sites and would strengthen IBM's challenge against Oracle Corp., the leader in database products. Both types of software are open-source, which means their underlying code is distributed freely over the Internet. Companies make money off open-source software by selling support services.

IBM believes it can cash in on Sun's software better than Sun can, because IBM has broader services and software offerings that it can sell as package deals.

Sun has long cultivated a go-it-alone attitude, epitomized by co-founder and former CEO Scott McNealy's relentless mocking of rivals like IBM and Microsoft. That posturing has been tamped down in recent years under Schwartz.

While Sun still has big sales - $13.3 billion over the last four

quarters - it has struggled to turn a consistent profit, losing $1.9 billion in the same period.

Its biggest areas have been hurting. Its server division's sales fell $225 million in the latest quarter to $1.37 billion. The storage division's sales fell $85 million to $570 million.

As a result, Sun might have to resort to more drastic cuts, including layoffs or shedding business units, if no deal is reached.

Jean Bozman, a research vice president for IDC, said Sun could survive as an independent company, but "what they have to become is more profitable than they've been. The question is, what size company would they be?"

Meanwhile, IBM has fared well because of constant cost-cutting and the Armonk, N.Y.-based company's increasing reliance on services and software, which can be more profitable than hardware sales. IBM earned $12.3 billion last year.

Huge Computer Worm Conficker Stirring to Life

The dreaded Conficker computer worm is stirring. Security experts say the worm's authors appear to be trying to build a big moneymaker, but not a cyber weapon of mass destruction as many people feared.

As many as 12 million computers have been infected by Conficker. Security firm Trend Micro says some of the machines have been updated over the past few days with fake antivirus software - the first attempt by Conficker's authors to profit from their massive "botnet."

Criminals use bogus security software to extort money. Victims are told their computers are infected, and can be fixed only by paying for a clean-up that never happens.

Conficker gets on computers through a hole Microsoft patched in October. PCs set up for automatic Windows updates should be clean.

Conficker Launches Money-Making Scam

Researchers discovered a new variant of the Conficker worm Thursday whose mission is to cash in on unsuspecting PC users. Security companies are warning that the variant is attempting to download malicious code onto victims' systems, possibly including copies of the Waledac Trojan, a spam-oriented application that has propagated through bogus e-mail messages.

The malware authors seem to be making headway after a false start on April 1. US-CERT said it's aware of reports indicating a widespread infection of the Conficker/Downadup worm, which can infect a Microsoft Windows system from a thumb drive, a network share, or across a corporate network if the network servers don't have the MS08-067 patch from Microsoft.

What happens next is up to the controllers of Conficker, according to Richard Wang, a manager at Sophos. There have been no significant updates since Thursday. The new Conficker variant, complete with enhanced features, is spreading, he said, and the malware authors are in a position to supply whatever updates they choose into the Conficker network.

One of Conficker's early moves was to download rogue security software onto infected PCs. "The fake security software that is downloaded is very visible. It will display messages and fake security scan results to users, urging them to purchase additional protection software," Wang said. "If it's on your PC, it's hard to miss."

The scareware is called Spyware Protect 2009. The program displays a pop-up message that tells a victim the computer is infected and says software is available to remove the fake antivirus program for $49.95. The victim is then sent to a fake Web site to enter credit-card information. The cybercriminals walk away with the money and the victim gets nothing but the bill. Security researchers warn that Conficker could be used to launch further attacks that are likely to focus on financial gain.

The publicity surrounding Conficker has been widespread, but security researchers agree there are always more people to reach. As Wang noted, new users sign on to the Internet every day, so the process of computer-security education is never-ending.

One of the key messages that needs to be repeated is that detection and removal can be accomplished with any good antivirus product. Separate removal tools are available and can be convenient, but they only deal with Conficker and do not secure a PC against other threats.

"People should be protecting their computers every day against all threats. Focusing on one particular threat at the expense of others can be counterproductive. Putting good security measures in place will help protect you against all threats," Wang said.

"People must also remember that security software should be used alongside good security practices, not instead of them," he added. "Keep your software patched and up to date, use strong passwords, and don't trust strangers on the Internet any more than you would trust strangers on the street."

Windows XP Death Date Pushed Beyond Windows 7 Release

Windows XP is the Microsoft OS that refuses to die.

Despite the popularity of Windows 7 - which is still in beta and does not yet have a firm release date - it has been claimed that Microsoft will allow PC giant Hewlett Packard to continue shipping computers with Windows XP until April 30, 2010. This deal has not been widely announced and should be considered a rumor.

AppleInsider reports that a source inside HP has learned that Microsoft will continue to sell Windows XP beyond May 30, 2009, the (latest) date the OS was supposed to no longer be available on new systems.

But selling XP doesn't necessarily mean it will be supported. The leaked internal memo states that Microsoft will discontinue XP mainstream support, and will provide only security updates. "It's important to remind customers that Microsoft are [sic] still planning to retire XP Pro Mainstream support on April 14th 2009 and will only provide OS security updates beyond that date unless the customer has an Extended Hotfix Support contract. MS Extended Support for XP Pro ends on April 8th 2014," the memo reads.

Downgrades will still cost interested consumers. Some PC makers have charged up to $150 to downgrade customers from Vista to XP; it's unknown how much HP will charge. The downgrades have been used to allay the fears of businesses and consumers that every Microsoft-generated OS beyond XP isn't a complete shipwreck.

If HP is allowed to ship XP beyond its many death dates, there's a chance other PC manufacturers will be able to do the same.

Windows 7's supposed release date is October 2009. Extending XP to and beyond this point allows consumers to ability to make a decision on whether to upgrade their systems to the better version of Vista or to stick with the tried and true OS.

Microsoft has to put its foot down and stop selling Windows XP. Continuing to sell the 8-year-old OS makes Microsoft look weak and no longer able to craft reliable materials fit for the public. If Microsoft wants to make Vista and Windows 7 look like winners, the company needs to promote them as reliagle and sturdy operating systems capable of handling consumer and business demands. Selling Windows XP appeases customer interests, but does nothing for a company looking to progress and innovate.

                    Time Warner Laying Ground for Possible AOL Spin

Time Warner Inc said on Monday it is asking some bondholders to change credit terms, a move expected to pave the way for a spin-off of its beleaguered Internet unit AOL.

The media conglomerate, whose shares fell 4 percent in early trading, said the change in credit terms will allow for a possible change in ownership at AOL.

The unit was once how most people found their way onto the Internet. It has since been left behind as a relic as cable and phone companies picked off subscribers and Google and others swooped in to dominate online advertising.

Last month Time Warner Chief Executive Jeff Bewkes lured former Google Inc executive Tim Armstrong to head AOL with the possibility of leading a spin-off.

"We view this announcement as significant as it clears a major hurdle to spin AOL to Time Warner shareholders," Sanford Bernstein analyst Michael Nathanson said in a note to clients.

AOL has long been one of the weakest units at Time Warner, thanks to a series of writedowns reflecting the declining value of the assets and a

slowing online advertising market. Time Warner's portfolio includes HBO, film studios and the Time publishing unit.

Nathanson said by separating AOL, Time Warner would double its estimated earnings growth between 2009 to 2012. He estimates that AOL would be valued at $2.4 billion on a stand-alone basis, a far cry from some estimates of up to $10 billion last year.

In a sign that Time Warner management wants to expediently decide AOL's fate, the company is offering each bondholder that agrees a payment of $5 for each $1,000 principal amount of debt. As part of the offer, Time Warner said the new agreement will be guaranteed by using HBO Inc as collateral.

Analysts at Bernstein and Citi now believe a spin-out is more likely. Nathanson said it could likely be announced in "the next few months".

The so-called consent solicitation is to amend the indentures covering around $12.3 billion of outstanding debt. It means that Time Warner will have to pay around $61.5 million to the bondholders if they all agree to the offer. The solicitation will expire at 5 p.m. New York time on April 15 unless extended.

Time Warner Cable Will Uncap Service for $150

Time Warner Cable issued a clarification to its proposed caps on Thursday, adding what is essentially a $150 unlimited tier to the high end.

In a statement attributed to Landel Hobbs, chief operating officer of Time Warner Cable and posted to Alongreply.com, Hobbs characterized press reports referring to the company's proposed caps as "premature". The statement was apparently published by Jeff Simmermon, director of communications for Time Warner Cable, who referred to it in a tweet.

The company had previously referred to a so-called 100-Mbyte super tier, without disclosing pricing.

"Some recent press reports about our four consumption based billing trials planned for later this year were premature and did not tell the full story," Hobbs wrote. "With that said, we realize our communication to customers about these trials has been inadequate and we apologize for any frustration we caused. We've heard the passionate feedback and we've taken action to address our customers' concerns."

Hobbs said that consumption-based billing has become prevalent overseas, and must be evaluated here in the United States. "If we don't act, consumers' Internet experience will suffer," he wrote. "Sitting still is not an option. That's why we're beginning the consumption based billing trials. It's important to stress that they are trials."

The trials will begin in Rochester, N.Y., and Greensboro, N.C., in August. The official tiers will be, according to Hobbs:

* A 1 GB per month tier offering speeds of 768 Kbytes downstream/128 Kbytes upstream for $15 per month. Overage charges will be $2 per GB per month. TWC's usage data show that about 30 percent of its customers use

less than 1 Gbyte per month, Hobbs wrote.

* Road Runner Lite, Basic, Standard and Turbo packages will include
expanded bandwidth caps to 10, 20, 40 and 60 GB, respectively, for the
same price. Overage charges will be $1 per GB per month.

* A new 100 GB Road Runner Turbo package will be added, offering speeds
of 10 MB/1 MB for $75 per month. Overage charges will be $1 per GB per
month.

* Overage charges will be capped at $75 per month. "That means that for
$150 per month customers could have virtually unlimited usage at Turbo
speeds," Hobbs added.

After the trials begin, customers will be offered two months of usage
data so that they can assess their usage. After that, a one-month grace
period will be instituted before the caps actually begin, allowing
consumers a chance to reassess and possibly sign up for a different
bandwidth tier, Hobbs wrote.

Pentagon Spends $100 Million To Fix Cyber Attacks

The Pentagon spent more than $100 million in the last six months
responding to and repairing damage from cyber attacks and other computer
network problems, military leaders said Tuesday.

Air Force Gen. Kevin Chilton, who heads U.S. Strategic Command, said the
military is only beginning to track the costs, which are triggered by
constant daily attacks against military networks ranging from the
Pentagon to bases around the country.

"The important thing is that we recognize that we are under assault from
the least sophisticated - what I would say the bored teenager - all the
way up to the sophisticated nation-state, with some pretty criminal
elements sandwiched in-between," said Chilton, adding that the
motivations include everything from vandalism to espionage. "This is
indeed our big challenge, as we think about how to defend it."

According to Army Brig. Gen. John Davis, deputy commander for network
operations, the money was spent on manpower, computer technology and
contractors hired to clean up after both external probes and internal
mistakes. Strategic Command is responsible for protecting and monitoring
the military's information grid, as well as coordinating any offensive
cyber warfare on behalf of the U.S.

Officials would not say how much of the $100 million cost was due to
outside attacks against the system, versus viruses and other problems
triggered accidentally by Defense Department employees. And they
declined to reveal any details about suspected cyber attacks against the
Pentagon by other countries, such as China.

Speaking to reporters from a cyberspace conference in Omaha, Neb., the
military leaders said the U.S. needs to invest more money in the
military's computer capabilities, rather than pouring millions into
repairs.

"You can either pay me now or you can pay me later," said Davis. "It

would be nice to spend that money proactively ... rather than fixing things after the fact."

Officials said that while there has been a lot of anecdotal evidence on the spending estimate, they only began tracking it last year and are still not sure they are identifying all the costs related to taking computer networks down after a problem is noticed.

The Pentagon has acknowledged that its vast computer network is scanned or probed by outsiders millions of times each day. Last year a cyber attack forced the Defense Department to take up to 1,500 computers off line. And last fall the Defense Department banned the use of external computer flash drives because of a virus threat officials detected on the Pentagon networks.

The cost updates come as the Obama administration is completing a broad government-wide review of the nation's cybersecurity.

Symantec Videos How 'Ghostnet' Can Hack PCs

The revelation last week that a specialized international botnet dubbed "Ghostnet" reached into government institutions across the world was shocking for who it affected, but the bot software itself is pretty interesting. Symantec has created a video showing the capabilities of the software. If only all legitimate consumer software were this powerful and easy to use.

The video bypasses the details of how a system becomes compromised which is separate from the bot software itself. The core of the software is an easy-to-use kit to generate an executable to infect a system, allowing attackers to customize the attack to whatever vehicle they choose.

Once installed, the botnet C&C (command and control) gets notified that a new victim is online. It can then use a control program to perform a variety of functions on the compromised computer: get screen shots, keylog, manage files a la Windows Explorer, capture from the system's webcam, etc. Or you can run a remote shell on the computer and run whatever programs you want.

The narrator of the video assures users that if they take reasonable security precautions, including keeping their anti-virus up to date, they are protected against Ghostnet. Makes you wonder about how well government systems across the globe are protected.

US Trade Office Releases Information on Secret Piracy Pact

The Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) has released some new details about an anticounterfeiting trade agreement that has been discussed in secret among the U.S., Japan, the European Union and other countries since 2006.

The six-page summary of the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) negotiations provides little specific detail about the current state of negotiations, but the release represents a change in policy at the USTR,

which had argued in the past that information on the trade pact was "properly classified in the interest of national security."

The summary of the negotiations, released Monday, says that the countries involved have been discussing how to deal with criminal enforcement of each others' copyright laws. The countries involved have discussed the "scale of infringement necessary to quality for criminal sanctions," as well as the authority of countries to order searches and seizures of goods suspected of infringing intellectual-property laws. The summary does not detail the current state of negotiations in those areas.

The trade pact negotiations have also talked about border measures that countries should take against infringing products and about how to enforce intellectual-property rights over the Internet.

Public Knowledge, a consumer rights group and one of three organizations suing USTR over its refusal to release information on ACTA, praised USTR for releasing the summary, but said more information is needed.

"The dissemination of the six-page summary will help to some degree to clarify what is being discussed," Gigi Sohn, Public Knowledge's president, said in a statement. "At the same time, however, this release can only be seen as a first step forward. It would have been helpful had the USTR elaborated more clearly the goals the United States wants to pursue in the treaty and what proposals our government has made, particularly in the area of intellectual property rights in a digital environment."

Since last June, Public Knowledge, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and Knowledge Ecology International (KEI) have filed Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for information about ACTA. USTR had argued that most of the information about the trade pact was classified while releasing just 159 pages of information on the agreement in January. Public Knowledge and EFF said then that USTR was withholding more than 1,300 pages of information.

When President Barack Obama took office in January, he directed U.S. agencies to be more transparent to the public. In early March, USTR denied an FOIA request from KEI, an intellectual-property research and advocacy group, citing national security concerns. But later that month, the agency pledged to undertake a long-term review of its transparency.

The release of the summary "reflects the Obama administration's commitment to transparency," USTR said in a statement. Other countries helped USTR draft the summary, the agency said.

"We look forward to taking more steps to engage with the public in our efforts to make trade work for American families," newly appointed U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk said in a statement.

The goal of ACTA is to negotiate a "state-of-the art agreement to combat counterfeiting and piracy," according to USTR. Among the nations participating in negotiations are Australia, Canada, the European Union, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea and Switzerland.

The U.S. and Japan began discussing an intellectual-property trade agreement in 2006, with other countries joining discussions later that year, according to the ACTA summary. Formal negotiations began in June

2008.

Don't Expect Privacy on Public MySpace Blogs

Guess what? That unlocked rant you put on your MySpace profile is open to the public and can be seen by anyone with a computer. Imagine that!

Cynthia Moreno learned this the hard way. A judge ruled earlier this month that it was not an invasion of her privacy when a local newspaper published a rant pulled from her MySpace blog.

After a visit to her hometown of Coalinga, Calif., college student Moreno penned a 700-word blog entry titled "An Ode to Coalinga" that opened with "the older I get, the more I realize how much I despise Coalinga."

Moreno subsequently deleted the blog entry, but Roger Campbell, principal of Coalinga High School, discovered it before the deletion and handed it over to his friend Pamela Pond, editor of the /Coalinga Record/ newspaper. Pond then published the rant in its entirety as a letter to the editor, printing Cynthia's full name.

The Moreno family was met with death threats and shots were fired outside their home. Cynthia's father David was forced to close his 20-year-old family business, and the family moved to another town.

The family sued the newspaper and the Coalinga-Huron Unified School District for invasion of privacy and infliction of emotional distress. The case against the newspaper was dismissed on free speech grounds, but the case against Campbell and the school district was allowed to proceed.

Campbell did not violate Moreno's rights when he handed over her rant to Pond because Moreno's blog entry was published on the Internet and available for anyone to see, according to the Superior Court of Fresno County.

"Under these circumstances, no reasonable person would have had an expectation of privacy regarding the published material," Justice Bert Levy wrote in his opinion. "By posting the article on myspace.com, Cynthia opened the article to the public at large. Her potential audience was vast."

"That Cynthia removed the Ode from her online journal after six days is also of no consequence. The publication was not so obscure or transient that it was not accessed by others," he concluded.

Justice Levy was also not concerned that the paper published Cynthia's full name.

"Although her online journal only used the name 'Cynthia,' it is clear that her identity was readily ascertainable from her MySpace page," he wrote. "Campbell was able to attribute the article to her from the Internet source. There is no allegation that Campbell obtained Cynthia's identification from a private source."

Did it violate her family's privacy? No, Levy said.

"Because the publication of the Ode was not an invasion of Cynthia's privacy, [her family] cannot state a claim based on the same alleged invasion," he wrote.

On the emotional distress point, Justice Levy said the issue would have to be decided by a jury. "We conclude that reasonable people may differ on whether Campbell's actions were extreme and outrageous," Levy wrote. "Accordingly, it is for a jury to make this determination."

Pond was fired from the paper for printing Moreno's blog, according to a local ABC affiliate. Campbell is still listed as the high school's principal on its Web site.

Are You A Twit If You Don't Want To Twitter?

Eily Toyama gave in after friends pestered her to join Facebook. But she used her cat's name instead of her own so she could avoid networking requests from people she didn't really want to connect to. And don't even ask her about Twitter unless you want to get an eye roll.

"I just don't think people need to know that much about my life," says the 32-year-old Chicagoan, who works in information technology.

Call it online sociability fatigue. And it's not just being felt by older folks who have lived most of their lives without the Web. As social networking grows, from stream-of-consciousness Twitter to buttoned-up LinkedIn, even some of the very young people who've helped drive these sites' growth could use a break.

Mike Nourie, a student at Emerson College in Boston, says he feels a little relieved to escape social networking when he works summers at an inn on Cape Cod where connection to the wired world is spotty.

"It gives me a chance to relax and focus on other things like music, work and friends," says the guitar-playing 20-year-old.

Last month, Alex Slater took it a step farther. He dumped his Twitter account and stripped the information on his Facebook page to a minimum. Though he has more than 600 "friends" on Facebook, he checks it much less often.

"Being exposed to details, from someone's painful breakup to what they had for breakfast - and much more sordid details than that - feels like voyeurism," says the 31-year-old public relations executive in Washington, D.C. "I'm less concerned with protecting my privacy, and more concerned at the ethics of a 'human zoo' where others' lives, and often serious problems, are treated as entertainment."

A recent survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 45 percent of Americans in all age groups are enthusiastic about socializing via computer and mobile devices. Meanwhile, 48 percent are indifferent to Internet social networks, overwhelmed by gadgets or often avoiding Internet use altogether.

Perhaps most surprising was the presence of a group that fell in between - the remaining 7 percent of the survey. These people, who had a median age of 29, are savvy about social networks and always carry mobile devices -

and yet they feel conflicted about staying in constant contact. Pew called them "ambivalent networkers."

"They have this anxiety about shutting off," says John Horrigan, the associate director at Pew who wrote the report. "They're afraid they might be missing something. But we also find them yearning for a break."

Gary Rudman, who tracks youth trends at GTR Consulting, has seen it, too.

"Bottom line: Who wouldn't be fatigued, given all of the social and business networking obligations thrust among young adults? With Facebook, LinkedIn, Plaxo and Twitter, young adults struggle to keep up to avoid the consequences - being left out of the loop or becoming irrelevant," Rudman says.

Jennavieve Bryan, a 25-year-old student at Golden Gate University in San Francisco, is still holding out from online social networking for now. She admits to feeling "a little twinge of jealousy" when she sees her friends' lives so nicely laid out on an online networking page, but she thinks it's too much trouble for too little reward.

"When my friends find out I don't have a MySpace or, God forbid, a Facebook page, they look at me like I should be exiled from our social circle," she says.

It shouldn't be surprising that quick-hit online communications, the stuff of 140-character "tweets" on Twitter and "status updates" on Facebook, leave some people cold. Craig Kinsley, a professor of neuroscience at the University of Richmond, notes that studies of human interactions reveal that our brains crave networking, online and off, but differentiate between the quality of the interactions.

"Many short contacts may leave the user wanting deeper, more meaningful exchanges. Like a meal of cotton candy, when you come right down to it, there is not much substance," he says. "A good conversation with a good friend is much more life-affirming than a few tortuously abbreviated or emoticon-filled lines in a tweet that anyone can read. How special is that?"

Paul Herrerias thinks more people are starting to get that.

Nearly seven years ago, Herrerias, managing director of the San Francisco office for Stanton Chase, an executive search firm, started a "CEO Club," a monthly breakfast meeting for executives looking for work after the dot-com bust.

"We could do a lot of this online. But it's the breakfast and looking people in the eye that fires them up," Herrerias says, noting that some people drive more than an hour to attend. "There's an empathy that goes on between us. I care about their needs and they care about me."

Check Point Slashing ZoneAlarm Price for 24 Hours

Each month on "patch Tuesday", Microsoft releases its latest security updates, and all of the security vendors weigh in with thoughts about these latest fixes.

This month, Check Point is doing more than just talking. On next week's "patch Tuesday" the company is slashing the price of its popular ZoneAlarm Internet Security from $49.95 to $9.95.

In addition, Check Point is donating half the proceeds to TechSoup Global, "a nonprofit organization devoted to making technology and technology education available and affordable to other nonprofits and libraries all over the world."

The sale begins at 6:00am PDT on April 14 and runs for 24 hours. To get this deep discount visit http://www.zonealarm.com/only24hours.

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